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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001472

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [IS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: ELECTION LAW FLAWED, BUT RIGHT MOVE,
INTERIOR MINISTER TELLS DAS HALE

REF: BEIRUT 1439

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) On October 7, Minister of Interior Ziyad Baroud told visiting NEA DAS David Hale that he was disappointed that many electoral reforms did not make it into the final law that parliament passed on September 29, but termed the new law as still encouraging. However, he added that providing security for a nationwide, one-day election was his biggest concern due to a lack of security resources and the constant threat of violence in certain areas of the country. Baroud attributed the challenges to a lack of border security between Lebanon and Syria as well as a lack of GOL sovereignty over the Palestinian camps. DAS Hale told Baroud USG policy towards Syria and Iran remains unchanged, and warned that Israeli officials may decide to take actions into their own hands if Lebanon fails to fully implement UNSCR 1701 and halt Hizballah's rearmament. End Summary.

ELECTION LAW
A GOOD THING

12. (C) Visiting NEA DAS David Hale and the Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met with Minister of Interior Ziyad Baroud at his office in West Beirut on October 7. Baroud said reformists like himself were not very successful in achieving all the desired reforms for the new electoral law, passed by parliament on September 29 (reftel). However, he noted the new law was a step in the right direction for Lebanon. He added that it would be difficult to implement all the reforms in time for the elections, (slated to occur between April and June, 2009).

13. (C) Currently, the Ministry of Interior is severely short-staffed, Baroud said. The hiring process is notoriously slow even when the Ministry had funding to hire new employees, not to mention that there is not enough time to fully train new hires on the new law, according to Baroud.

Therefore, the Ministry is in desperate need of international community and civil society support, he said. (Note: Baroud said at the meeting that he would release his long-awaited Master Plan, which would serve as the coordination strategy for the donor community, on October 10. However, we have since learned that the release will be postponed for at least two weeks. End Note.)

¶4. (C) Baroud said the key reforms missing from the new law were the use of pre-printed ballots and the establishment of an Independent Election Commission (IEC). In addition, he added that he had no flexibility in trying to implement reforms that were absent from the new law and that some reforms that were passed would require extra funding from the GOL to implement (e.g., facilitating one-day elections). DAS Hale said the USG was pleased that a new election law was passed and that this was announced publicly. However, the USG toned down its enthusiasm for the law because of many of the flaws that Baroud himself pointed out, according to DAS Hale. But, this was a positive step forward and this election would determine Lebanon's future, he said.

ELECTION SECURITY

¶5. (C) Baroud said his major concern before the elections would be security. He noted that nationwide elections could not occur on one day without providing a secure environment for all regions. Lebanon's second-largest city of Tripoli had been chaotic and, while it was calmer now, if the situation were to deteriorate, it would be "nearly

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impossible" for the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to provide security there on election day.

SYRIAN DEPLOYMENT MIGHT HELP BORDER SECURITY

¶6. (C) Regarding the recent deployment of Syrian troops along Lebanon's northern border, Baroud said such a move was not necessarily a bad thing in terms of providing border security as long as the Syrians stayed on their side of the border. Baroud said for border security to be effective between Lebanon and Syria, Syrian buy-in would be necessary at some point. However, because of politics, neither he nor anyone in the GOL would publicly endorse such a move by the Syrians. Baroud also said the GOL and President Sleiman support implementing the recommendations set forth by the UN's Lebanon Independent Border Assessment Team (LIBAT) II report, while continuing on the Lebanese/Syrian track.

USG POLICY TOWARDS SYRIA AND IRAN

¶7. (C) DAS Hale stressed that USG policy towards Syria had not changed. He noted that in Secretary Rice's meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Mouallem, the Secretary laid out the benchmarks that Syria would have to meet in order for USG policy towards Syria to change, including implementing UNSCR ¶1701. DAS Hale also said that the USG does not support one faction over another in Lebanon, but supports strengthening Lebanese institutions and the forces of moderation that support peace and democracy in Lebanon.

WHAT ABOUT ISRAEL?

¶8. (C) Baroud said as long as the areas of Ghajar and Sheba'a Farms remained under occupation by Israel, or outside of the control of the UN, this would be a serious issue between Lebanon and Israel. He said that the National Dialogue would directly and indirectly address some of these issues and also address Hizballah's weapons. However, the

issue is very complicated and as long as these areas remained occupied, Hizballah would continue to use them as an excuse to maintain its weapons.

¶9. (C) DAS Hale agreed, but this did not mean the GOL should abandon efforts to halt the flow of weapons across the border to rearm Hizballah. DAS Hale noted the GOI's concern over Hizballah's rearmament, adding that Israel understands that its options to halt such rearmament are imperfect, but the GOI eventually will have to consider action if the Lebanese and the international community are doing nothing effective to implement 1701 and end the arms flow.

¶10. (C) Currently, the GOL could not address these issues, Baroud said. He added that the GOL is a national unity government and that Hizballah is part of this government. Baroud said Israel likes to define all Lebanese as being part of Hizballah, but that many Lebanese oppose the group. The Lebanese people would not support a first strike attack on Israel by Hizballah, but if Israel were to conduct a pre-emptive strike against Hizballah, especially before the elections, it would bolster Hizballah's stance amongst the people.

¶11. (C) DAS Hale stressed that the GOL needs to show the international community that it is serious about halting weapons smuggling. Baroud said the National Dialogue was the perfect example to highlight this seriousness.

PALESTINIANS CAMPS

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¶12. (C) Although there was a press report that the LAF was planning to route terrorist elements from the Beddawi Palestinian refugee camp in the North, Baroud said such an operation was not feasible. He addressed the many difficulties the LAF faces in gathering intelligence on developments in the camps, in addition to the fact that many people living within the camps are Lebanese citizens. However, Baroud felt something had to be done to address the lawlessness of the camps. The GOL did not rule all of Lebanese territory, due to lack of control over the Palestinian camps, which he described as "nests" of terrorists. However, he stressed that he was not accusing the Palestinians of being terrorists; often the Palestinians residents are the first victims.

COUNTERNARCOTICS

¶13. (C) Ambassador noted that the topic of the ISF's counternarcotics operations in the Bekaa Valley region was raised during the recent Joint Military Commission meetings between the LAF and the U.S. Department of Defense. Baroud said the GOL needs to have a comprehensive strategy that combines eradication operations with an effective crop substitution program. He also noted that it would be best to engage hashish and opium growers before they plant their illegal crops, which typically occurs in March. Baroud felt that this would be the best way to avoid violent confrontations, and noted that the ISF still needs the support of the LAF to enter a village. He added that the Internal Security Council had recently met and addressed the need for a comprehensive strategy.

¶14. (C) DAS Hale agreed that there was a need for alternative solutions. He noted the failed UN program that was initiated during the 1990s, saying that the program did nothing to support poor farmers in the Bekaa Valley region. Most of the UN funding was misappropriated by program managers, or went to support local politicians who profited from the program politically and financially. DAS Hale said the USG would continue to look forward to helping the GOL in combating the drug trade and supporting the GOL's counternarcotics

operations.

¶15. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this cable.
SISON